

Haiti: Real Progress, Real Fragility

A Special Report by the Inter-American Dialogue
and the Canadian Foundation for the Americas

Haitian President René Préval says that his country no longer deserves its “failed state” stigma, and he is right. Haiti’s recent progress is real and profound, but it is jeopardized by continued institutional dysfunction, including the government’s inexperience in working with Parliament. There is an urgent need to create jobs, attract investment, overhaul and expand access to basic social services, and achieve tangible signs of economic recovery. Now that the United Nations has extended its peacekeeping mandate until October 2008, the international community must seek ways to expand the Haitian state’s capacity to absorb development aid and improve the welfare of the population. The alternative could be dangerous backsliding.

Haiti is beginning to emerge from the chaos that engulfed it in recent years. This is a moment of relative stability that presents a window of opportunity for Haiti to move towards a more sustainable path of economic growth, political development, and poverty reduction. But this is also a period of fragility and continued vulnerability, and further advancement is by no means assured.

In February 2006, Haiti held its first elections in five years, which brought to power former President René Préval and restored elected rule for the first time since the ouster of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide two years earlier. Over the past eighteen months, the Haitian government,

working with the United Nations and other international partners – including a core group of Latin American countries, the United States and Canada – has achieved modest but discernible progress in improving security and establishing, at least minimally, a democratic governing structure. But institutions, both public and private, are woefully weak, and there has not been significant economic advancement. Unemployment remains dangerously high and a majority of the population lives in extreme poverty. Still, Haiti should be viewed today with guarded optimism. There is a real possibility for the country to build towards a better future.

The Good News

President René Préval was inaugurated in May 2006 following presidential and parliamentary elections that were accepted as free and fair by the international community, and most importantly, by the great majority of Haitians. Local and municipal elections were held in December of last year, completing Haiti’s electoral cycle and filling key positions through the democratic process. During his first year in office, President Préval, in his quiet and self-effacing way, has proven to be an effective leader. He has appointed competent ministers to critical posts, and reached across party lines to bridge Haiti’s historic political polarization. Préval has forged alliances with moderate elements within Haiti’s civil society, political parties, and business sectors, while holding onto support from the Haitian poor,

This report reflects the findings of a joint delegation to Haiti by the Inter-American Dialogue and the Canadian Foundation for the Americas that took place from July 29 to August 1, 2007. The authors express their appreciation to Lionel Delatour of CLED for his contribution to the trip and Caroline Lavoie of FOCAL for her assistance with the report.

Haiti

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and maintaining the backing of the international community. To date, Préal's instincts have generally been democratic and inclusive, and he has made tough choices, including the decision to confront the criminal gangs in Port-au-Prince. The government is still weak, however, and has limited capacity to set internal priorities and implement decisions and policies. The government has little evident experience in working with Parliament, and the Parliament itself remains poorly organized and under-resourced. It has not adequately contributed to the governing process.

Haiti's security situation has markedly improved in recent months. This is largely due to more effective performance by the 9,100-troop strong United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), which entered the country more than three years ago. The UN Security Council has extended the mandate of the peacekeeping mission until October 15, 2008, with a total force of 7,060 military troops and 2,091 police officers. This one-year renewal marks MINUSTAH's longest extension since the mission began, and is a welcome sign of the international community's continued commitment to Haiti. Most importantly, last spring Préal supported efforts by UN forces to confront the gangs directly, particularly in the troubled Port-au-Prince neighbourhoods of Cité Soleil and Martissant. The Haitian National Police initiated a vetting process to examine officers' records in detail, and hundreds suspected of corruption were purged while new recruits were selected and trained.

The Haitian government's political will to tackle the gangs, combined with better cooperation between the UN and the Haitian National Police, has led to the capture or killing of major gang leaders and the re-establishment of a state presence in some of the country's most dangerous slums. This

progress has restored the confidence of the Haitian population in the UN mission and increased support for the Haitian government as a whole. But the new calm in Haiti will be hard to sustain; any reduction in UN forces without a substantial increase in the Haitian police presence would lead to a return of violence. Moreover, while Latin American countries continue to contribute the bulk of UN troops, many will eventually seek to shift their focus from peacekeeping to development. Haiti would benefit from a strategy to manage that process over the long term.

Haiti's economy appears to be stabilizing after years of stagnation and decline. Haiti achieved a GDP growth rate of more than 2 percent last year, even though per capita growth remained negative. This year the country's growth rate will be more than 4 percent – barely above the rate of population increase but a move in the right direction. The uptick has been driven by an increase in foreign aid and remittances, and new U.S. trade preferences passed last year may help to sustain it. Haiti's manufacturing sector is showing glimmers of revival. Haitian economic officials have established a favourable macroeconomic climate, cutting the inflation from above 40 percent to below 10 percent and stabilizing Haiti's currency. Despite these gains, Haiti's economy remains virtually stagnant on most fronts and plagued by widespread joblessness. Even with sustained domestic leadership, it will take many years of foreign assistance before Haiti can make its own economic way.

Key Challenges

Some of Haiti's most urgent political and social challenges are:

- **Strengthening Parliament and its Relations with the Government.** All of Haiti's institutions remain weak. Haiti's Parliament

has neither the resources nor the experience to perform its legislative role. The president and administration have few mechanisms for dealing with Parliament. Political parties are focused on personalities and localities and play no role in integrating the larger population. These are inter-related problems that need to be addressed together. The Haitian Parliament today acts as though its main role is to ratify or block executive action rather than to propose or shape policy. Many parliamentarians lack staff, equipment, offices, and other infrastructure. Some elected officials use their cars as offices. In August, a parliamentary vote of “no confidence” ousted President Préval’s minister of culture and underscored the precarious and confrontational relations between the executive and the legislature. In addition, while many individual parliamentarians have impressive credentials and are well-intentioned, others have sought elected office principally to gain parliamentary immunity that protects them from prosecution for illegal activities.

- **The Haitian National Police and Administration of Justice.** The need to recruit and train a new Haitian police force is a core priority for the government and the international community. The task is daunting and the failure of similar efforts in the 1990s emphasizes the need for long-term engagement with this issue. Still, there is movement in the right direction. Today, the Haitian National Police (HNP) is comprised of 7,000 policemen, with some 1,400 more completing training by mid-2008. But the HNP is still distant from its target force of 15,000 officers.

Existing training facilities are insufficient to meet the needs of the HNP, and the international community has so far been unwilling to help build new facilities. In addition, the HNP still lacks a helicopter police and

the Coast Guard is totally inadequate. In order to stem corruption, hundreds of police have been purged, mainly for gang involvement or human rights abuses. Officials hope that an increase in police salaries will help to reduce graft. There are three bills pertaining to the modernization of the judicial system currently before Parliament, but the wider breakdown in the justice system makes it nearly impossible to prosecute police officers, and most ordinary criminals go free as well. Conversely, many potentially innocent people wait behind bars for their cases to be adjudicated. The need to train more judges and improve physical infrastructure is extremely pressing.

- **The Potential for Constitutional Breakdown.** The Haitian constitution mandates frequent national elections that place great financial and organizational strain on the government and the international community. The numerous and costly elections required by the constitution are untenable given the scarcity of resources available to the Haitian state. The constitution, for example, demands that 10 Haitian senators face election in December (in addition to an eleventh senate seat left vacant when its occupant died in a car accident last winter). This would be Haiti’s sixth national election in an 18-month period, and the cost is estimated to exceed US\$15 million. Amending the constitution in order to streamline Haiti’s elections requires actions by three successive parliaments. In addition, the civil registry for the 2006 elections has already become dated. Haiti’s political stability is threatened by the possibility of elections that are subject to indefinite postponement. The senatorial elections due in December will pose the next test. If they are delayed, then the Haitian senate will enter 2008 with less than two-thirds of its 30 seats filled – hardly a promising sign for the country’s return to electoral democracy.

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- **Education.** More than half of Haiti’s population is functionally illiterate and some 500,000 school age children have never had the chance to attend school. The public school system is poorly run and reaches only a small minority of children, leaving privately-managed schools to fill this huge gap with wide variations in quality and curriculum. Even those children receiving education may be learning little. A major constraint in the education system is the quality and number of teachers; an estimated 1,000 teachers are needed to meet the demand for education. New partnerships between public agencies and private sector schools may provide a path forward. A bill has been submitted to the Haitian Parliament that would create the framework for dialogue between public and private entities and for improving governance in the educational sector. Some parliamentarians are concerned that this bill will lead to the supremacy of the private sector over public sector education, but new alliances and resources are desperately needed to expand and improve education.

Our Conclusions

1. Faced with these pressing challenges—in addition to the urgent needs to jump-start the Haitian economy and sustain security improvements – the United States, Canada, the agencies of the United Nations, and the wider international community have a critical role to play in helping the country advance. The sustained involvement of the international community is crucial to facilitating Haiti’s emergence as a viable, self-sufficient state—and the renewed UN mandate is a welcome and necessary part of that commitment.
2. President René Préal has surpassed expectations in terms of his ability to maintain a level of social peace and focus government priorities on key issues like security. He is not a miracle worker and continues to face important constraints on his ability to act, but he has proven himself to be a trustworthy development partner. His government merits international support.
3. Most international donor agencies are still struggling to figure out how to work effectively in Haiti. While recognizing that significant strides have been made in recent years, donor aid remains only loosely coordinated and often places a large administrative burden on the Haitian government that taxes sparse institutional resources. Better coordination among the development banks, international aid agencies, and the Haitian government remains a high priority.
4. The United Nations mission in Haiti has benefited tremendously from the involvement of a core group of Latin American countries including Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. Their continued engagement, as well as a larger role for Mexico, should be encouraged and supported by traditional development actors.
5. Haiti suffers from a lack of absorptive capacity that has several ill effects. Resources are often slow to reach their intended targets and the government finds itself unable to implement desired projects. Lack of adequate staff remains a critical problem. International development agencies should set aside financing to enable the government to hire competent, well-trained staff at prioritized ministries so that the Préal administration can move quickly to execute its plans.
6. Haiti’s substantive problems are compounded by the fact that its reputation lags behind the real progress that has been made, and discourages investment, tourism, and support for new initiatives. International rating agencies should thoroughly

review and revise their data on Haiti to ensure their judgments reflect the current reality and are not grounded in information that is now outdated.

7. The Haitian Parliament requires urgent attention so that it can begin to fulfill its role in the democratic process. Poorly organized and based on a weak political party system, the Parliament thus far has been more of a roadblock than a partner in Haiti's development. Efforts to train parliamentarians have been insufficient thus far, but are ongoing. New efforts to strengthen Parliament are a top priority. A greater focus on Parliament itself must be matched by improving the government's capacity to work with elected officials.
8. Haiti's security situation has improved markedly in recent months. The United Nations peacekeeping mission has become much more effective in tackling the gangs that were the sources of violence in the slums of Port-au-Prince and Gonaives. However, any drawing down of UN troops will result in an upsurge of violence unless efforts to vet and train the Haitian National Police are not only sustained but increased. Moreover, Haiti's overall administration of justice is in dire condition and should be a core focus of international assistance.

9. Rampant unemployment is one of the top challenges facing the country today. Having increased security, the government and international community must now demonstrate tangible evidence that lives are improving by focusing on jobs, investment, and infrastructure. While some job creation programs have been implemented, clearly more effort is required to generate employment that will help Haitians to take care of their basic needs and provide the basis for greater social stability. Many of Haiti's important challenges, including sanitation, waste removal, and the development of basic infrastructure, can be achieved using Haiti's vast unskilled and semi-skilled labor pool. Innovative approaches to job creation must be a top priority.

The current juncture in Haiti is critical. International efforts have contributed importantly to peacekeeping and economic stabilization, but little visible progress has been made in promoting economic development and improving social well-being. The Haitian government and its international development partners now have one year to focus on these important tasks before the UN peacekeeping mandate expires in October 2008. Haiti's hopeful but fragile progress will be difficult to sustain unless Haitian and international authorities pledge to tackle the country's problems with renewed urgency.

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Delegation to Haiti

The Right Honorable Joe Clark
Former Prime Minister of Canada
Board Member, Canadian Foundation for the Americas
Member, Inter-American Dialogue

Peter D. Bell
President Emeritus, CARE USA
Co-Vice Chair, Inter-American Dialogue

Peter Hakim
President, Inter-American Dialogue

Carlo Dade
Executive Director
Canadian Foundation for the Americas

Daniel Erikson
Senior Associate and Program Director
Inter-American Dialogue



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1211 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 510
Washington, DC 20036

PHONE: 202-822-9002 ■ FAX: 202-822-9553

EMAIL: iad@thedialogue.org ■ WEB SITE: www.thedialogue.org